Biography of Socrates

Life and philosophy of Socrates

The Greek philosopher and logician Socrates (469-399 BC) was an important formative influence on Plato and had a profound effect on ancient philosophy.

Socrates was the son of Sophroniscus, an Athenian stone mason and sculptor. He learned his father's craft and apparently practiced it for many years before devoting his time almost completely to intellectual interests. Details of his early life are scanty, although he appears to have had no more than an ordinary Greek education. He did, however, take a keen interest in the works of the natural philosophers, and Plato (*Parmenides,* 127C) records the fact that Socrates met Zeno of Elea and Parmenides on their trip to Athens, which probably took place about 450 BC Socrates wrote nothing; therefore evidence for his life and activities must come from the writings of Plato and Xenophon. It is likely that neither of these presents a completely accurate picture of him, but Plato's *Apology, Crito, Phaedo,* and *Symposium* contain details which must be close to fact.

Socrates as he grew to manhood learnt his family's trade as a sculptor. As well as learning this trade he also received a more formal education in geometry and astronomy. He had a hunger for knowledge that was credible and that could not be undermined by contrary facts. According to an account in Plato's "The Phaedo" Socrates started out with much enthusiasm for the sciences but eventually came to regard his teachers as merely imparting "received knowledge" that they could not themselves prove - he decided to seek true knowledge of "causes" and of "the good" elsewhere and was prepared to rely on his own intuitions as a guide in his search.

Socrates personal appearance was not impressive. He was seemingly rather ugly with a snub nose, piercing eyes, a broad nose and a wide mouth - he nevertheless became prominent in Athenian life because of the range and qualty of his mind and his ideas!!! Athenians who came to know him held that whatever about his appearance he was "all glorious within" - he was on speaking terms with many of those who were at the centre of Athenian affairs.

Alike with other citizens Socrates was called upon to serve the Athenian state in times of war. He served as a hoplite soldier and showed much personal courage - he had a naturally mystically inclined personality and was occasionally found to be somewhat rapt in ecstacies and trances even whilst on military service.
The Athens of the day was morally and ethically dislocated due to the sufferings and struggles associated with the ongoing Peloponessian Wars with Sparta.

A friend, in consultation with the Oracle at Delphi, asked was any man wiser than Socrates. The Oracle replied that there were not!!! Upon being told of this answer Socrates maintained that this implied that he, alone, had this claim to wisdom - **that he fully recognised his own ignorance.**

From that time Socrates sought out people who had a reputation for wisdom and, in every case, was able to reveal that their reputations were not justified. Socrates regarded this behaviour as a service to God and decided that he should continue to make efforts to improve people by persuading and reminding them of their own ignorance.

What we now call the "Socratic method" of philosophical inquiry involved questioning people on the positions they asserted and working them through further questions into seemingly inevitable contradictions, thus proving to them that their original assertion had fatal inconsistencies. Socrates refers to this "Socratic method" as *elenchus*. The Socratic method gave rise to *dialectic*, the idea that truth needs to be **approached** by modifying one's position through questionings and exposures to contrary ideas.

Whilst Socrates was polite and considerate, in the ways in which he brought people to face their own ignorance and at the same time encouraged them to join with him in a sincere search for truth, many of these interviews were conducted in public in market-place or Gymnasium. The youth of Athens came to regard it as a form of entertainment to see those of pretentious reputation humbled. Some people used the Socratic method to similarly bring others to face their own ignorance but may have been less polite and more personal in their approach. Those so discomfited often blamed those they held responsible for misleading youth rather than themselves for entertaining unjustifiable pretensions.

Socrates came to feel that he had a "Divine mission" to improve the moral education of the Athenians and tended to neglect his business in order to spend time in moral philosophising and in informal educational discussions with Athenian youths.

Prior to the times "philosophy" had been primarily directed towards the natural sciences. Socrates is held to be largely responsible for opening up moral, ethical, and political questions of virtue and justice as being of primary interest to philosphers.
Socrates married Xanthippe late in his life, possibly as his second wife, some sources suggest that this lady was a tad shrewish. Socrates is held to have been way less serious about earning a living than in continuing his "mission" as a moral educator so Xanthippe, as the mother of a family, may have had grounds for impatience.

As to Socrates' personal philosophy - he left no writings of his own so we have to rely on sources such as Plato and Xenophon, who knew him and his philosophy personally, for information.
Both these men were much younger than Socrates and were only really in a position to know him as a philopher during the last decade of his life. Of the two it is Plato who has left the more extensive and vivid record of Sorates' life and teachings in a number of dialogues.

In Plato's dialogue "The Phaedo" Socrates holds that life must be lived with a view to the "cultivation of the Soul". The Orphic and Pythagorean faith background of the day accepted the deathlessness of the Soul, and accepted physical death as also involving the release of the Soul.
Where a person had lived a good life, - had cultivated their Soul, - they were held to merit a far more pleasant situation in an afterlife reincarnation than where a person had led a bad life.
The very fact of belief in an afterlife making the cultivation of the Soul a matter of the utmost importance.

Platos "The Symposium" (i.e. Banquet) has the mystically inclined Socrates delivering a speech that expatiates on the hunger of the Soul for the Good and the True.Socrates did not seek to involve himself in the political life of Athens as he felt that there would inevitably be compromises of principle that he was not prepared to make. As a prominent citizen he was called upon to fulfil minor

political roles.
In 399 B.C. Socrates was accused of "impiety", of "neglect of the Gods whom the city worships and the practise of religious novelties" and of the "corruption of the young".
These accusations may have been to some extent political as Athens had recently been restored to democracy and several prominent opponents of democratic forms of governance had close links with Socrates.

Although friends were willing to arrange for his escape Socrates, in deference to the rule of law, took the poison Hemlock in prison in accordance with a death sentence that he did not consider to be justified.

From the *Apology* we learn that Socrates was well known around Athens, that uncritical thinkers linked him with the rest of the Sophists, that he fought in at least three military campaigns for the city, and that he attracted to his circle large numbers of young men who delighted in seeing their pretentious elders refuted by Socrates. His notoriety in Athens was sufficient for the Athenian comic poet Aristophanes to lampoon him in *The Clouds,* although the Socrates who appears there bears little resemblance to the dialectician in Plato's writings. His endurance and prowess in military campaigns are attested by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. He tells of Socrates's valor in battle, which allowed Alcibiades to escape when he was in a perilous situation. He also recounts an incident which reveals Socrates's habit of falling into a kind of trance while thinking. One morning Socrates wandered a short distance off from the other men to concentrate on a problem. By noon a small crowd had gathered, and by evening a group had come with their bedding to spend the night watching him. At the break of day, he offered up a prayer to the sun and went about his usual activities.

In addition to these anecdotes about Socrates's peculiar character, the *Symposium* provides details regarding his physical appearance. He was short and Silenus-like, quite the opposite of what was considered graceful and beautiful in the Athens of his time. He was also poor and had only the barest necessities of life. He was not ascetic, however, for he accepted the lavish hospitality of the wealthy on occasion (Agathon, the successful tragic poet, was host to the illustrious group in the *Symposium*) and proved himself capable of besting the others not only at their esoteric and sophistic sport of making impromptu speeches on the god Eros but also in holding his wine. Socrates's

physical ugliness was no bar to his appeal. Alcibiades asserts in the same dialogue that Socrates made him feel deep shame and humiliation over his failure to live up to the high standards of justice and truth. He had this same effect on countless others.

His Thought

There was a strong religious side to Socrates's character and thought which constantly revealed itself in spite of his penchant for exposing the ridiculous conclusions to which uncritical acceptance of the ancient myths might lead.

His words and actions in the *Apology, Crito, Phaedo,* and *Symposium* reveal a deep reverence for Athenian religious customs and a sincere regard for divinity. Indeed, it was a divine voice which Socrates claimed to hear within himself on important occasions in his life. It was not a voice which gave him positive instructions, but instead warned him when he was about to go astray. He recounts, in his defense before the Athenian court, the story of his friend Chaerephon, who was told by the Delphic Oracle that Socrates was the wisest of men. That statement puzzled Socrates, he says, for no one was more aware of the extent of his own ignorance than he himself, but he determined to see the truth of the god's words. After questioning those who had a reputation for wisdom and who considered themselves, wise, he concluded that he was wiser than they because he could recognize his ignorance while they, who were equally ignorant, thought themselves wise. He thus confirmed the truth of the god's statement.

Socrates was famous for his method of argumentation. His "irony" was an important part of that method and surely helped account for the appeal which he had for the young and the disfavor in which he was held by many Athenians.....

Socrates was an ancient Greek philosopher who is widely credited for laying the foundation for Western philosophy. By far the most important source of information about Socrates is Plato, who depicts him as a contradictory character. Plato's dialogs feature Socrates as a teacher who denies having disciples, as a man of reason who obeys a divine voice in his head, a pious man who is executed for religious improprieties. Socrates disparages the

pleasures of the senses, yet is excited by youthful beauty; he is devoted to the education of the boys of Athens, yet indifferent to his own sons; few other characters have so fascinated the western world.

The trial and execution of Socrates was the climax of his career and the central event of the dialogs of Plato. According to Plato, however, both were unnecessary. Socrates admits in court that he could have avoided his trial in the first place by abandoning philosophy and going home to mind his own business. After his court conviction, he could have avoided the death penalty by agreeing to pay a small fine, and once in prison he could have escaped. Socrates participated in his famous martyrdom every step of the way, and his story supplies, one way or the other, the foundation for western philosophy.

Life of Socrates

Details about Socrates are derived from three contemporary sources: Besides the dialogues of Plato there are the plays of Aristophanes and the dialogues of Xenophon. Aristotle, a much younger contemporary of Plato, was born after the death of Socrates. If Socrates wrote anything, it has not survived. Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates is at odds with the popular view that Socrates was an intellectual force in Athens during the fifth century BCE. His early play, The Clouds, pictures Socrates as a clown who teaches his students how to bamboozle their way out of debt. This play, originally produced in 423 BC (re-produced in 416 BCE), won third place at the Dionysia theatre festival.

According to Plato, Socrates' father was Sophroniscus and his mother Phaenarete, a midwife after whom Socrates modelled his own career as a midwife to boys in the throes of giving birth to their thoughts. Socrates married Xanthippe, who must have been far younger than her husband. She is alleged to have born him three sons - Lamprocles, Sophroniscus and Menexenus - Socrates died when the boys were all quite young, and takes criticism from his friend Crito for abandoning them.

It is unclear how Socrates earned a living. If we believe Timon of Phlius and later sources, Socrates took over the profession of stonemasonry from his father. But no earlier sources corroborate this story, and Plato never depicts

Socrates as coming to or from the job site. On the contrary, he pictures him loitering around schoolyards looking for children to befriend. According to Xenophon's Symposium, Socrates is reported as saying he devotes himself only to what he regards as the most important art or occupation: discussing philosophy. Xenophon and Aristophanes respectively portray Socrates as accepting payment for teaching and running a sophist school with Chaerephon, while in Plato's Apology of Socrates and Symposium Socrates explicitly denies accepting payment for teaching. In the Apology, Socrates cites his poverty as proof that he is not a teacher. His final words suggest that he was very poor indeed: he requests that his friend Crito pay off a small debt (a rooster) to the god Asclepius.

Several of Plato's dialogs refer to Socrates' military service. Socrates says he served in the Athenian army during three campaigns: at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. In the Symposium Alcibiades describes Socrates' valour in the battles of Potidaea and Delium, recounting how he saved his life in the former battle (219e-221b). Socrates' exceptional service at Delium is also mentioned in the Laches, by the general the dialogue is named after (181b). In the Apology Socrates compares his military service to his courtroom troubles, and says that anyone on the jury who thinks he ought to retreat from philosophy must also think that soldiers should ditch when it looks like they will be killed in battle.

Trial and death of Socrates

Socrates lived during the time of the transition from the height of the Athenian Empire to its decline after its defeat by Sparta and its allies in the Peloponnesian War. At a time when Athens was seeking to stabilize and recover from its humiliating defeat, the Athenian public may have been entertaining doubts about democracy as an efficient form of government. Socrates appears to have been a critic of democracy, and his trial is interpreted by some scholars to be an expression of political infighting. Socrates was in any case a scapegoat, a man who willingly or not, pays for the sins of his society with his own blood. The defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War may have been the catalyst for the impulse to punish.

Despite claiming death-defying loyalty to his city, Socrates was highly critical of Athens' claims to glory and fame: her democratic system of government and her artistic achievements. He praises Sparta, arch rival to Athens, directly and indirectly in various dialogs. In the ideal state he designs in Plato's Republic, he recommends a military communism, where children are ripped out of their mothers' arms and sent to boot camp at a very early age. In his "ideal" system of government, rulers tell lies to the people for their own good, and manage the education of the young men so that they wish for nothing more than the opportunity to fight and die for the good of the state. This cannot have been well received by Athenians, who while well advanced militarily, took greatest pride in their cultural achievements. In the Protagoras, Socrates praises the laconic wisdom of the Spartans.

According to Plato's Apology, Socrates' life as the "gadfly" of Athens began when his friend Chaerephon asked the oracle at Delphi if anyone was wiser than Socrates; the Oracle responded negatively. Socrates, interpreting this as a riddle, set out to find men who were wiser than he was. He questioned the men of Athens about their knowledge of good, beauty, and virtue. Finding that they knew nothing and yet believed themselves to know much, Socrates came to the conclusion that he was wise only in so far as he knew that he knew nothing. Socrates' paradoxical wisdom made the prominent Athenians he publicly questioned look foolish, turning them against him and leading to accusations of wrongdoing.

He was nevertheless found guilty as charged, and sentenced to death by drinking a silver goblet of hemlock. Socrates turned down the pleas of his disciples to attempt an escape from prison, drinking the hemlock and dying in the company of his friends. According to the Phaedo, Socrates had a calm death, enduring his sentence with fortitude. The Roman philosopher Seneca attempted to emulate Socrates' death by hemlock when forced to commit suicide by the Emperor Nero.

According to Xenophon and Plato, Socrates had an opportunity to escape, as his followers were able to bribe the prison guards. After escaping, Socrates would have had to flee from Athens. In the painting "Death Of Socrates", under the death bed, there is an irregularly-shaped tile, which many believe is an escape hatch. Socrates refused to escape for several reasons. 1. He believed that such a flight would indicate a fear of death, which he believed

no true philosopher has. 2. Even if he did leave, he, and his teaching, would fare no better in another country. 3. Having knowingly agreed to live under the city's laws, he implicitly subjected himself to the possibility of being accused of crimes by its citizens and judged guilty by its jury. To do otherwise would have caused him to break his 'contract' with the state, and by so doing harming it, an act contrary to Socratic principle.

After Socrates's death, Plato described it in the dialogue Phaedo.
“ "He walked about and, when he said his legs were heavy, lay down on his back, for such was the advice of the attendant. The man who had administered the poison laid his hands on him and after a while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. He said "No"; then after that, his thighs; and passing upwards in this way he showed us that he was growing cold and rigid. And again he touched him and said that when it reached his heart, he would be gone. ... To this question he made no reply, but after a little while he moved; the attendant uncovered him; his eyes were fixed." ”

Socrates Philosophical beliefs

The beliefs of Socrates, as opposed to those of Plato, are difficult to discern. Little in the way of concrete evidence demarcates the two. There are some who claim that Socrates had no particular set of beliefs, and sought only to examine; the lengthy theories he gives in the Republic are considered to be the thoughts of Plato. Others argue that he did have his own theories and beliefs, but there is much controversy over what these might have been, owing to the difficulty of separating Socrates from Plato and the difficulty of interpreting even the dramatic writings concerning Socrates. Consequently, distinguishing the philosophical beliefs of Socrates from those of Plato and Xenophon is not easy and it must be remembered that what is attributed to Socrates might more closely reflect the specific concerns of these writers.

If anything in general can be said about the philosophical beliefs of Socrates, it is that he was morally, intellectually, and politically at odds with his fellow Athenians. When he is on trial for heresy and corrupting the young, he admonishes a jury of his peers that their moral values are upside down. He

tells them that they are concerned with their families, careers, and political responsibilities when they ought to be worried about the "welfare of their souls." Socrates' belief in the immortality of the soul, and his conviction that the gods had singled him out as a divine emissary seemed to provoke if not annoyance, at least ridicule. Socrates also questioned the common man's belief that good education creates good citizens. He liked to observe that successful fathers (such as the prominent military general Pericles) did not produce sons of their own quality. Socrates argued that moral excellence was more a matter of divine bequest than parental nurture. This belief may have contributed to his lack of anxiety about the future of his own sons.

Besides arguing that virtue cannot be taught, Socrates put forth a great variety of unintuitive ideas. He proposed that people who see with their eyes are all but blind, and argued that truth is invisible. He believed that knowledge is not gained from instruction and study, but from divine dispensation. Politically, Socrates was an ardent critic of democracy, apparently because he believed that there is no wisdom in the masses. At a time when his fellow citizens took pride in having developed an alternative to tyranny, Socrates argued that a wise and noble tyrant was the ideal alternative to the random decisions made by democratic methods.

Socrates frequently says that his ideas are not his own, and that he has gotten them from his teachers. He mentions several influences: Prodicus the rhetor and Anaxagoras the scientist. Perhaps surprisingly, Socrates claims to have been deeply influenced by two women besides his mother. He says that Diotima, a witch and priestess from Mantinea taught him all he knows about eros, or love, and that Aspasia, the mistress of Pericles, taught him the art of funeral orations. John Burnet argued that his principal teacher was the Anaxagorean Archelaus but that his ideas were as Plato described them; Eric A. Havelock, on the other hand, considered Socrates' association with the Anaxagoreans to be evidence of Plato's philosophical separation from Socrates.

Knowledge

Socrates seems to have often said that his wisdom was limited to an awareness of his own ignorance. Socrates may have believed that wrongdoing was a consequence of ignorance, that those who did wrong knew no better. The one thing Socrates consistently claimed to have knowledge of was "the art of love" which he connected with the concept of "the love of wisdom", i.e., philosophy. He never actually claimed to be wise, only to understand the path that a lover of wisdom must take in pursuing it. It is debatable whether Socrates believed that humans (as opposed to gods like Apollo) could actually become wise. On the one hand, he drew a clear line between human ignorance and ideal knowledge; on the other, Plato's Symposium (Diotima's Speech) and Republic (Allegory of the Cave) describe a method for ascending to wisdom.

In Plato's Theaetetus (150a) Socrates compares himself to a true matchmaker (προμνηστικός), as distinguished from a panderer (προᾰγωγός). This distinction is echoed in Xenophon's Symposium (3.20), when Socrates jokes about his certainty of being able to make a fortune, if he chose to practise the art of pandering. For his part as a philosophical interlocutor, he leads his respondent to a clearer conception of wisdom, although he claims that he is not himself a teacher (Apology). His role, he claims, is more properly to be understood as analogous to a midwife (μαῖα). Socrates explains that he is himself barren of theories, but knows how to bring the theories of others to birth and determine whether they are worthy or mere "wind eggs" (ἀνεμιαῖον). Perhaps significantly, he points out that midwives are barren due to age, and women who have never given birth are unable to become midwives; a truly barren woman would have no experience or knowledge of birth and would be unable to separate the worthy infants from those that should be left on the hillside to be exposed. To judge this, the midwife must have experience and knowledge of what she is judging.

Virtue

Socrates believed that the best way for people to live was to focus on self-development rather than the pursuit of material wealth. (Gross 2). He always invited others to try to concentrate more on friendships and a sense of true community, for Socrates felt that this was the best way for people to grow together as a populace. His actions lived up to this: in the end, Socrates accepted his death sentence when most thought he would simply leave Athens, as he felt he could not run away from or go against the will of his community; as above, his reputation for valor on the battlefield was without reproach.

The idea that humans possessed certain virtues formed a common thread in Socrates' teachings. These virtues represented the most important qualities for a person to have, foremost of which were the philosophical or intellectual virtues. Socrates stressed that "virtue was the most valuable of all possessions; the ideal life was spent in search of the Good. Truth lies beneath the shadows of existence, and that it is the job of the philosopher to show the rest how little they really know." (Solomon 44)

Ultimately, virtue relates to the form of the Good; to truly be good and not just act with "right opinion"; one must come to know the unchanging Good in itself. In the Republic, he describes the "divided line", a continuum of ignorance to knowledge with the Good on top of it all; only at the top of this line do we find true good and the knowledge of such.

Socrates Politics

It is often argued that Socrates believed "ideals belong in a world that only the wise man can understand" making the philosopher the only type of person suitable to govern others. According to Plato's account, Socrates was in no way subtle about his particular beliefs on government. He openly objected to the democracy that ran Athens during his adult life. It was not only Athenian democracy: Socrates objected to any form of government that did not conform to his ideal of a perfect republic led by philosophers (Solomon 49), and Athenian government was far from that. During the last years of Socrates' life, Athens was in continual flux due to political upheaval.

Democracy was at last overthrown by a junta known as the Thirty Tyrants, led by Plato's relative, Critias, who had been a student of Socrates. The Tyrants ruled for about a year before the Athenian democracy was reinstated, at which point it declared an amnesty for all recent events. Four years later, it acted to silence the voice of Socrates.

This argument is often denied, and the question is one of the biggest philosophical debates when trying to determine what, exactly, it was that Socrates believed. The strongest argument of those who claim that Socrates did not actually believe in the idea of philosopher kings is Socrates' constant refusal to enter into politics or participate in government of any sort; he often stated that he could not look into other matters or tell people how to live when he did not yet understand himself. He believed he was a philosopher engaged in the pursuit of Truth, and did not claim to know it fully. Socrates' acceptance of his death sentence, after his conviction by the Boule (Senate), can also be seen to support this view. It is often claimed that much of the anti-democratic leanings are from Plato, who was never able to overcome his disgust at what was done to his teacher. In any case, it is clear that Socrates thought that the rule of the Thirty Tyrants was at least as objectionable as democracy; when called before them to assist in the arrest of a fellow Athenian, Socrates refused and narrowly escaped death before the Tyrants were overthrown. He did however fulfill his duty to serve as prytanie when a trial of a group of generals who presided over a disastrous naval campaign were judged; even then he maintained an uncompromising attitude, being one of those who refused to proceed in a manner not supported by the laws, despite intense pressure. [1] Judging by his actions, he considered the rule of the Thirty Tyrants less legitimate than that of the democratic senate who sentenced him to death.

Mysticism of Socrates

As depicted in the dialogues of Plato, Socrates often seems to manifest a mystical side, discussing reincarnation and the mystery religions; however, this is generally attributed to Plato. Regardless, this cannot be dismissed out of hand, as we cannot be sure of the differences between the views of Plato and Socrates; in addition, there seem to be some corollaries in the works of Xenophon. In the culmination of the philosophic path as discussed in Plato's Symposium and Republic, one comes to the Sea of Beauty or to the sight of the form of the Good in an experience akin to mystical revelation; only then can one become wise. (In the Symposium, Socrates credits his speech on the philosophic path to his teacher, the priestess Diotima, who is not even sure if Socrates is capable of reaching the highest mysteries). In the Meno, he refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries, telling Meno he would understand Socrates' answers better if only he could stay for the initiations next week.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of this is Socrates' reliance on what the Greeks called his "daemonic sign", an averting (ἀποτρεπτικός) inner voice that Socrates heard only when Socrates was about to make a mistake. It was this sign that prevented Socrates from entering into politics. In the Phaedrus, we are told Socrates considered this to be a form of "divine madness", the sort of insanity that is a gift from the gods and gives us poetry, mysticism, love, and even philosophy itself. Alternately, the sign is often taken to be what we would call "intuition"; however, Socrates' characterization of the phenomenon as "daemonic" suggests that its origin is divine, mysterious, and independent of his own thoughts.